

Islam's sober millennium

A thousand years ago, the world revolved around the Middle East and **Islam**. **Martin Kramer** traces how all that changed in the past millennium, and offers some advice on how the region could return to its former glory

What a difference a thousand years can make.

In the year 1000, the Middle East was the crucible of world civilization. One could not lay a claim to true learning if one did not know Arabic, the language of science and philosophy. One could not claim to have seen the world's greatest cities if one had not set eyes upon Baghdad and Cordoba, Cairo and Bukhara.

Global trade flourished in the fabulous marketplaces of the Middle East as nowhere else. The scientific scholarship cultivated in its academies was unrivaled. An Islamic empire, established by conquest four centuries earlier, had spawned an Islamic civilization, maintained by the free will of the world's most creative and enterprising spirits.

A thousand years later, the Middle East sulks on the margins of a world civilization forged in the West. The region's languages are hardly known abroad; they convey no vital science. Most Middle Eastern cities teem with rural migrants and lack the basic refinements of cultural capitals.

The markets of the Middle East are local exchanges, not international hubs, and the region draws hardly any international investment. The region's best scholars and scientists go abroad to study, and most never return. It is one of the least congenial places in the world for creative and enterprising spirits.

The year 2000 is not the Islamic millennium. By the Islamic calendar, this is the year 1420, and orthodox Moslems profess an indifference to the millennium hype. But the fact that the entire world counts its years from the birth of Jesus, and not the hegira of the Prophet Mohammed, speaks volumes about the relative fortunes of **Islam** — and the Middle East.

When Christendom marked its first millennium, the rest of the world took no notice. The Islamic counting of the years mattered far more, from the Atlantic to the Indus. Today, the Islamic counting does not govern any part of the world, and the Christian counting has become the secularized, universal marker of time. Reflection, not celebration, will be the response across the Middle East to the new millennium, and it begins with a sense of lost primacy.

CONSIDER the state of **Islam** in the year 1000. Not only did it encompass what is now called the Middle East, **Islam** extended well into Central Asia, where it stood astride the lucrative Silk Route. **Islam** also reigned in Iberia and Sicily, which assured Moslem control of half the Mediterranean.

True, Byzantine Constantinople still resisted conquest, and Moslems could not establish permanent footholds elsewhere in Europe. But there could be no doubt that the dynasties of **Islam** represented the political, military, and economic superpowers of the day.

This supremely urbane civilization cultivated genius. Had there been Nobel Prizes in 1000, they

would have gone almost exclusively to Moslems. One laureate certainly would have been the brilliant polymath Biruni (973-circa 1050) — astronomer, mathematician, mineralogist, botanist, linguist, and historian.

Among his numerous accomplishments, he determined almost precisely the radius and circumference of the earth. Moslem preeminence in astronomy lasted until the 15th century, and was symbolized by the prestige of Arab astrolabes in European navigation.

Medicine also inspired Moslem genius, most notably in the person of the philosopher Ibn Sina, or Avicenna (980-1037). He championed the science of the Greeks, and the practice of medicine in Europe rested upon his Canon of Medicine right through the 15th century. European universities taught anatomy in Arabic terminology for nearly that long.

One did not have to be a Moslem to participate fully in the political and intellectual life of Islamic civilization. Jews such as Ibn Shaprut (c.915-c.970), diplomat and physician to the Cordoba caliphate, and

the poet-philosopher Ibn Gvirol (c.1020-c.1057) entered an open door for knowledge and a mastery of Arabic meant more than fidelity to Islam.

Within Islamic civilization, scientific exchange was a matter of course. Physicians and philosophers traveled from court to court, and no great palace was complete without a vast library, if not a "house of wisdom," a kind of institute for advanced study.

European knowledge in the sciences paled in comparison, and was sustained through the Middle Ages by crumbs snatched from the Moslem table. From the point of view of a civilized Moslem (or a Jew living under **Islam**), the lands beyond the Pyrenees were the heart of darkness.

But beneath the surface of Islamic civilization, other forces were at work. Champions of Islamic orthodoxy feared the sciences — the idea of a continuous revelation of truths — and they stifled thought.

Political and social divisions also provided openings for rivals. Crusaders briefly established themselves on **Islam's** shores. Mongols

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sacked Baghdad, and the Reconquista reclaimed all of Moslem Andalus. These were omens, but their implications were not yet clear.

ISLAM observed its own first millennium on October 19, 1591. The event seems not to have caused any great surge of millenarian expectation, for **Islam** still remained a comfortable power in the world.

True, in the nearly 600 years between the first Christian and Islamic millennia, the Moslem

world had known setbacks. But on the other side of the ledger, a new Moslem dynasty, the Ottomans, had breached the walls of Byzantine Constantinople in 1452. The city rose again as Istanbul, a nexus of monumental mosques, markets, and palaces.

The Ottomans extended their reach deep into the Balkans — a Turkish word meaning "wooded mountain" — and then added the Fertile Crescent, Egypt, and North Africa to their domains. Rich holdings yielded vast surpluses, transforming Istanbul into the largest and most opulent city in Europe. **Islam** still had its superpower.

But by 1591, so too did Western Europe.

There, scientific revolutions were transforming technology and society. Ocean-sailing ships, printing, clocks, lenses — advances in every area propelled Europe toward voyages of discovery and innovations of industry.

And Europe also began to study **Islam** — not just to refute it, as in the Middle Ages, but also to defeat it, by seeking the defects in

its formidable armor.

Defects there were.

In Moslem domains, medieval structures of society, economy, and thought remained intact. Urban centers focused upon trade, but invested little in manufacture. There were guilds, but little organized effort to promote economic growth. Powerful religious interests filtered all innovations, and succeeded in blocking the most important, printing, for two centuries.

Beyond the cities, peasants and nomads maintained their precarious balance, as they had for millennia, and agriculture knew no advances. This was not decline — but it was not progress.

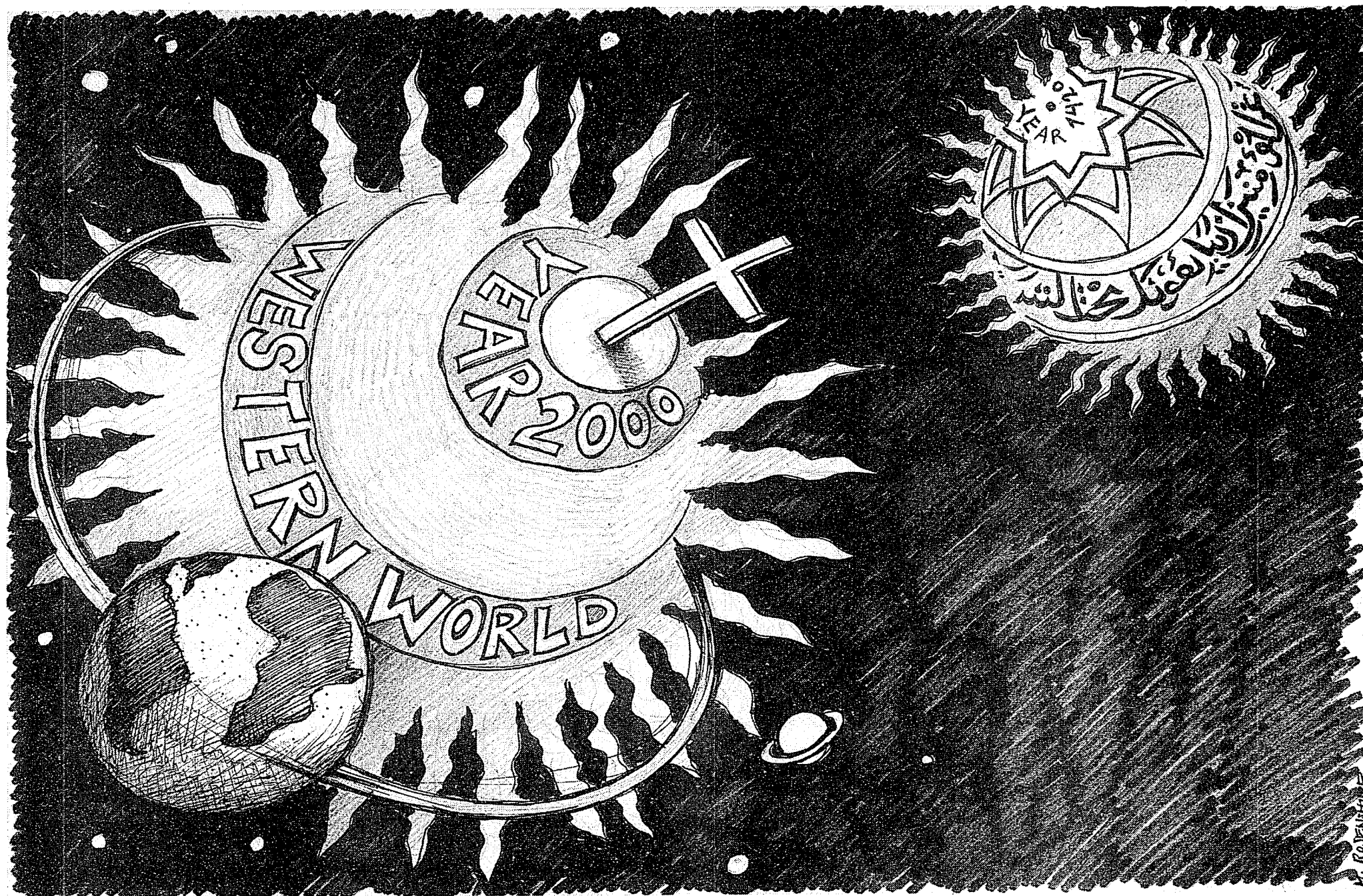
Moslem armies and elites admired and borrowed some European techniques and fashions. But they resisted more fundamental changes, and they could not borrow quickly enough to keep pace with the innovations and inventions of the West.

The Ottoman Empire proved incredibly tenacious, for it rested upon a proud and confident spirit, bolstered by an unshakable faith

in **Islam**. But in 1683, the Ottomans were turned back for the last time from the gates of Vienna: no more would Europe tremble at the specter of the Turk.

In 1699, the Ottomans accepted their first treaty as a defeated power: no more would they dictate terms. The Ottoman retreat eventually became a general rout. In 1798, Napoleon briefly occupied Egypt, and in 1830 France conquered Algeria. Europe seemed poised to threaten even the wholly Moslem possessions of the empire — including the Middle East.

THE TERM "Middle East" is plainly Western in origin. It was coined by an American naval strategist to define a zone framed by the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf. By 1903, the term had become so accepted that *The Times* of London no longer put quotation marks around it. In two simple words, the new usage affirmed the fact that the heartland of **Islam** now orbited Europe.



ISLAM

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In 1900, to mark the turning of the century, Paris hosted the Universal Exposition. The site layout clearly reflected the power relations which then prevailed.

The "colonies" acquired in the 19th century were grouped in the Trocadéro Park: Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia. Independent Persia got a small back lot, next to Peru.

The Ottoman Empire still had a respected place, on the Quai d'Orsay alongside the US. They were both classified as satellites of Europe, in distant orbits. But they were following opposite trajectories. Early in the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire lost a world war and collapsed; late in the century, the US won a cold war and emerged as the sole superpower. In between, the Middle East underwent a total reconfiguration.

After the First World War, Turkey, Persia, and Arabia managed to maintain a residual independence. But the Fertile Crescent — the predominantly Arab bastions at the core of the Middle East — came under British and French domination.

On the timescale of history, this was but a brief moment — from the Versailles Treaty of 1920 to the Suez War of 1956 — but it left a permanent imprint on the map of the Middle East. Europe fashioned new states from the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire, and defined their borders.

Old dynasties fell, new elites took power. Jewish nationalism exploited the moment to build a base, win recognition, and establish the State of Israel.

Since then, decolonization has filled the map of the Middle East with independent states — including, sometime soon, the state of Palestine — but the system still rests on the resolve of an external power.

The Ottomans preserved regional order a century ago, Europe followed suit, and now the system is guaranteed by the Americans. Will it ever be possible again for this region to develop as an independent center of political, economic, and cultural power? Or will it continue, as much of it does now, to nurse old wounds and curse the new world order?

WITH few exceptions, the Middle East is in a bad way. Some of its economies have grown rapidly, or at least faster than population growth: Israel, Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia stand out. Other economies cannot keep up: Jordan, Syria, and Iran provide examples. Some economies have shrunk dramatically, as in Iraq and the Palestine-to-be. In most countries, islands of prosperity are surrounded by seas of deprivation.

Politically, the Middle East remains the last preserve of prolonged one-man rule. Israel and Turkey follow democratic norms, but in the rest of the region, the state still dominates society. There is a skepticism toward solutions. Decolonization was supposed to usher in a new era, but it did not deliver wealth or democracy. Nor did Arab-Israeli peace.

Islamism's failures have been undeniable. Now the Middle East, threatened by globalization, is being nudged toward regional cooperation. It is the last hope.

But it is a hope. Looking forward, the inhabitants of the Middle East should consider what it was that made the region so central to the world a thousand years ago. It was not

Islam, or natural resources, or geo-strategic centrality. It was entrepreneurship, cosmopolitanism, and tolerance.

A millennium ago, people and goods moved freely between cities and across frontiers. A check written in Baghdad could be cashed in Fez; a scholar from Cordoba could find a position in Cairo. One did not have to be a Moslem to do business or teach science, and one did not have to force knowledge into religious straitjackets. The state intervened only where necessary to insure order and uphold the law.

Some see the slogan of a "new Middle East" as an Israeli gloss on a European idea, framed in American terms. But Middle Easterners need not rely on Israeli visionaries, European models, or American vocabulary. A program for the year 2000 can be extrapolated from the best features of the year 1000. This is no guarantee that the Middle East will regain the preeminence it enjoyed then. But the new millennium is young.

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